

## Epilogue

### *How Ruth's Story Ended*

It was a balmy Summer evening after a warm, bright and pleasant sunny day. A beguiling mixture of scent from honeysuckle and Philadelphus reached Ruth as she sat, alone, in the Italian Garden, idly reliving some of the moments from the day and watching the last rays of the sun as they stretched outwards above the trees. There were a pair of crows, black, crossing the still blue sky, making their way home, yet there was not a single cloud. It was a perfect a day and a location as she could ever have imagined or beseeched God for. She had no doubt why her uncle had so loved this spot and often felt that his spirit was there, to guide her and, if ever she needed guidance, she was in need of it now. She knew this day would come. She had written it into her stars, but why should she let that trouble her in this place? Was it blasphemy or arrogance to think that this was how Paradise must have been and that she was an Eve, waiting for the arrival of her Adam before the coming of the snake?

And he came. She could see him come under the arch leading from the Rose Garden, looking for her, then hurrying in her direction as soon as he saw where she was seated. She had noted it in his character, a tendency to hasten about things, to make things important or even urgent. It was all a part of an intensity that he carried with him and applied to everything he did. She could not find fault with him over it, though had she not striven to bridle or obstruct it, their task would have been over in a matter of a few weeks, and that was not what she had in mind when they set out together.

He had the papers. How rare it was, she thought, to see him without them. They had become a semi-permanent feature of his appearance. He would look quite different now that he no longer had an excuse to carrying them everywhere with him. She would have, perhaps, to give him a new reason. And, yes, here he was, still hastening, even though they were both at their journey's end! Perhaps there would be another journey? Perhaps they would now go their separate ways? This would be a critical moment.

"I have written it all right up to date," he said, slightly breathlessly, "except I have not recorded the events of the day."

"Our day is not yet over," she said, wistfully. Yes, she knew she would miss him and his company.

"They are wonderful people and I thought it was a wonderful idea of you to bring them all here on this anniversary."

"At least my innkeeper has been re-united with his pannier basket. I shall never forget the look of surprise and joy when I produced it. I am sure that up to that point he had no idea that it was I who he had so kindly helped on that awful day."

"And your two teachers and their landlady. They thought it was wonderful here and could not help themselves mentioning it at every opportunity!"

"I wish I could invite them all to live here with me. I feel that I have so much here that I should share with others. Of course, it would be wrong of me to interfere in their lives so I will content myself to inviting them all on this weekend each year for as long as they can or wish to come and as long as I am able to receive them. It is important that I should remember the good from my past as well as the evil."

"And, tell me, Lady Mottram," he said, sitting. "Why did you instruct that the track to the boating lake should be barred today of all days?"

"I do not really know why," she said, feeling that a heavy cloud had passed across the face of the sun though neither was now visible in the sky. "I had this feeling, almost this sense that no-one should go there. My uncle never permitted it to be used on account of what happened, and he is still there, Lucy's father, in the lake. Perhaps one day I will have it filled in."

"But, for the present? What now?" he said.

“Now?”

“What should I write now?”

“The End,” she said, curtly.

“The End?” he asked. There was disappointment in his voice, but what could she do. The story that they had shared over the past twelve months had run its course. “I was hoping that I might be able to write a happier ending than the one it presently has.”

“A happier ending?” she said, looking puzzled. “Are you suggesting that there is a chapter that we have not yet written?”

“No, Lady Mottram, not another chapter. It simply appeared to me that The End is somewhat abrupt.”

“I think we could include that poem you sent with the note. That could form the frontispiece.”

“I was more concerned about the end,” he said, glumly.

“But what could be more apt?” she said, teasing him. “All stories appear to end that way. It most certainly is a convention that I have adopted for mine. Are you saying that we have not allowed the tale to close in the right spot? Should we end it here, in this garden which was a favourite spot for my uncle and which I adore?”

“Perhaps I was hoping,” he said, hesitantly, “that it would not end. I had hoped - I am not sure what I had hoped.”

He was not sure? Of course he was sure! She knew he was as certain as to what he had in his mind as she was. But were he to speak his mind, what should she answer? They had spent much of the last twelve months in each other’s company as she dictated and he wrote the account of what had happened. He had been attentive, kind, courteous gentlemanly and non-demanding. She could fault him in nothing other than being as close to perfection as she could imagine. His standing in the eyes of her mother and uncle had never ceased to improve. Everything pointed towards this being a perfect match and though she was now absolutely certain of him, she was not certain of herself.

If he had pressed her, she could not have found any one reason. It was an accumulation of many things some of which she did not fully understand. Perhaps none was on its own a sufficient impediment to her future, but all taken together they sufficed to colour her judgement. Some days she had catalogued them, her birth, her wealth, her experience, all these things that made her wary, but there was one matter which ranked above them all, one that she would have to convey to him if the circumstances demanded it.

“I think the book must now come to its end,” she said, laying down the final page of the manuscript. “It may not be the happiest of endings in literature, but it is true. And I am not renown as a writer of stories with happy endings.”

“I see,” he said, dejectedly. “And what of the book now that it is written?”

“Now that it is written I can put it all behind me. I will give the manuscript to Uncle Lancaster and he can place it in his safe.”

“You will not have it published?” he said, anxiously.

“No,” she said, firmly. Oh, it was such a cruel thing to say to one who had devoted a year of his life faithfully transcribing her words, but the year had completely served its purposes. Publication was never within her contemplation. “I will deposit with him with the instruction that it should not be published in less than fifty years after my death.”

“And now?” he said. She could see the look of fear and desperation in his eyes. It should have been a look of hope, but she had placed it there. In that instance she could have wept for him, and for herself, for what he wanted to say, for what he needed to say, for she could not say it for him.

“Lady Mottram,” he began.

“Ruth,” she said. “I think you may call me by my name.”

“Ruth!” he said, as if it were the most beautiful word in all languages. “Ruth, I think you must know how I feel about you. You must now be aware that I have felt this way for you ever since I saw you first here. I now know that your opinion of me then and subsequently was unfavourable, but I had hoped that this past year, and my conduct during it, would have given you an opportunity to revise your opinion. But there are matters that your book does not

cover. You still cannot imagine what torment I suffered when I learned you were to marry another man. At that point I thought that you were lost for ever. And matters for me became even worse when I finally realised what your cousin's and husband's intentions were towards you. The time I have spent here, at your side, sharing in your work, has been like paradise to me and has healed many of the wounds I felt. Oh, Ruth, nothing could give me greater happiness than to spend the rest of my life with you. Nothing!"

He paused but Ruth did not respond, but she did raise an eyebrow as if to indicate that he had not finished and that she expected more to come.

"I would have said all this a long time ago. It would have been better if I could have done so when you were plain Ruth Mottram but I hardly knew you and could find no way of bringing myself into contact with you. And then you were married. Now that you are a woman of great property and title it seems almost presumptuous for me to say what I am saying, and I would understand if you see fit to put me in my place. But as one who had now served his parole and is now about to be sentenced to exile, I feel that I must say what my heart tells me to say. I am sorry if it affects the etiquette of your Country."

"This is all very bold," she said, softly, "but you have no cause to apologise nor be anything other than perfectly open and frank with me. As for my fortune and title, they are impediments, but I would renounce both before I allowed either of them to blight my future happiness. I can now understand why they say that money should always marry money so that there is an equality of interests and trust between the parties. But before you protest, Signor Calaceli, let me say that I consider that I know you well enough to know that my position and title are not what you seek. And before you go any further, I should explain that I have examined my heart, honestly and critically. I find that although I have greatly enjoyed, and would continue to enjoy, your company, I do not love you. I am not sure that I will ever come to love any man again. You must understand and believe that as I would not have you think otherwise."

"Then my suit is hopeless, then?"

"I did not say that. I said only that I did not love you and that I doubt that I could ever find it in my heart to love you. But, then, that was the exact position when I married, except my husband was not honest with me as I am with you, and he apparently loathed me. That is not how I feel for you."

He looked forlornly down at the manuscript before him. Now Ruth felt pity for him but this was the major impediment that had always surfaced when she examined her feelings, and she felt that no matter how cruel and heartless it might sound, he had to know of it. Now there was a danger that he would leave with the question still unasked. "I dare say that there are many marriages like it," she added. "Many perfectly happy marriages."

"If that is so, Ruth," he said, slowly. "Will you marry me?"

The sun had set but the evening was still warm and the air still scented. They could have sat there all night, or at least until Mr Twigg sent someone in search of them. That might have been romantic, but was there romance without love? Yet she had no doubt that here was love, unselfish, unquestioning, enough for them both.

"We ought to return to the house," she said, standing. "We can talk on the way."

He took her arm. She had not given him his answer, but it was time to start upon a completely new book. Perhaps later that evening, or the next day, or next week, she would reply. He would not leave now without her answer and, whenever it was that she gave it, she knew exactly what it would be. At least one of her stories would have a happy ending!

The End